the skin horse

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the death of a toy is in many ways inevitable. — woody, bonnie, buzz, jessie

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Introduction
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She is five years old, and she plays with them every day.

Today they are allies, fighting a seemingly hopeless war against the evil pig wizard of time and space. (They will triumph in the end, of course, after a battle of epic magical proportions, but at the moment the situation is dire.) Yesterday, many among them erred on the side of wickedness, traitors to the throne of Sparkle Land. Even Jessie had been swayed by the darkness, stabbing him in the back at the last moment, and he remembers the anguish he felt as she kidnapped Princess Trixie before his very eyes. (But that, of course, was yesterday.) And tomorrow? Who knows? Perhaps it will be his turn to cackle maniacally and set trap upon trap for the intrepid heroes. Perhaps a meteor will crash or an earthquake will split the room in two or maybe, just maybe, they'll all attend a masquerade ball.

Bonnie is far more imaginative than Andy ever was, and sometimes Woody finds himself longing for the days of being the plain ol' sheriff, charged with keeping order in a lawless town. It's what he was made for, after all. It says so right on his badge, though countless close encounters have scratched the second "F" into oblivion. But then the day will draw to a close, and Bonnie will put each toy away with care and dedication, perhaps a word of congratulation or contrition for the role they played in the most recent adventure, and he'll know from the smile on her face that it's worth it. He may not be the same sharp-shootin' sheriff these days, but for the first time in many years he feels whole and loved (which is all a toy can ever ask for, really).

The bottom of his boot still says "ANDY" in crooked, faded letters, but part of his cross-stitched heart already belongs to the dark-haired little girl with the intelligent eyes.

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She is eight years old, and the games she plays with them are fewer and far between.

This was the age that Andy began to grow away from them as well, but this time they are not so confused, not so lost and betrayed. Growing up is a natural process, after all. Children get older and move on to bigger and better things, like the pictures on the wall at Sunnyside – an endless cycle of imagination giving way to reality. At eight, Andy much preferred to play kickball with his friends, or mash buttons on the latest video game. At eight, Bonnie much prefers reading, or scribbling in her journal, or gazing at the stars through her high-powered telescope.

When they're lucky, though, Bonnie will send them on a mission to Mars, where they will discover an alien race and establish a bio-dome for interplanetary tourism and place the Official Flag of Bonnie's Room upon the tallest mountain. Sometimes she will set them up in orderly rows for a game of school, jotting down the attendance on her clipboard and awarding star stickers for good behavior.

"What is the biggest planet in our solar system?" she asks, and frowns when Slink gives her an incorrect answer. "Tsk tsk. You won't do well on the test with those kind of study habits, now will you?"

Writing class comes after science, and none of their essays are quite up to par.

"I don't miss being a Space Ranger as much I thought I would," Buzz muses one day. "It's not so bad, having no great evil to defeat. We've been through a lot over the years, and it's… it's kind of nice to take it easy, you know?"

"Yeah," Woody says, and puts a hand on his old friend's shoulder. "I know."

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She is eleven years old, and they sit untouched on the shelf.

They can still feel her love, though, in the lingering, nostalgic glances she gives them. That is enough for them, because truth is, they're getting old. Woody can feel the painted plastic of his left eye beginning to fade, feel the stitching around his arms loosening slightly every day. Buzz's helmet doesn't quite function anymore, and his "laser" went dead sometime last year, blinking pathetically a few times before being eternally extinguished. Rex's tail got thrown away with the garbage. Mr. Potato Head is missing an ear. Part of Hamm's foot is chipped from an unfortunate accident, and his once-gleaming paint is grubby from the many hands that have shaken him over the years.

They are a ragtag bunch, slightly shabby but well-loved, and peace and quiet in the comfort of Bonnie's room is all they need to feel content.

One day a group of three girls come bursting through the door, giggling incessantly, each carrying materials to construct some strange school project. Bonnie shuts the door behind her nervously – it's been nearly four years since she last had a friend in her room.

"Bonnie, are those *toys* ?" one of the girls asks, lip curling into an unpleasant sneer. "Do you seriously play with those things?" She turns to the others and snickers, and Bonnie's face turns a delicate shade of pink.

"Th-those are my… my brother's," she mutters, staring at the floor. "They're not mine."

"I thought you were an only child," another girl says, a cruel smile on her face. "If they're your toys, just fess up to it."

"Yeah, Bonnie."

"Fess up to it."

Bonnie is trying her hardest not to cry. "N-no," she mutters. "They're not mine, I swear. They're not mine."

This time around, Woody thinks, it doesn't hurt as much to hear.

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They do not know how old Bonnie is, because she doesn't visit them in the attic.

They are not bitter. They've had more happiness than most toys could ever dream of – second chances for some, third, even fourth chances for others. They're old and worn, memories of a more innocent time, rose-tinted ghosts of past naïveté. They're antiquated, too, because progress is progress and who knows what kind of toys the children play with these days? Do they have gears and switches? Are pull-strings a thing of the past? Is there any place in the world for an old cowboy doll, a stuffed hedgehog, a Mr. Potato Head?

Every toy is made with the innate knowledge that it will someday cease to be. Someday it will lay forgotten in a box, thrown away with the trash, its batteries struggling to produce that necessary spark of life. The death of a toy is, in many ways, inevitable.

But it is when a toy begins to fall apart, seams unraveling and hinges creaking and colors growing duller with each passing day, that it knows it has served its purpose. It has been loved and made real by a child. And in the end, that is enough.

"I'm happy," Jessie says. Her eyes widen as she says this – it is a revelation, a stunning conclusion, a culmination of all the joy and heartache she's been through in her life.

It's harder to move these days, now that they've been forgotten. But Woody reaches over with some difficulty and grips her hand tightly.

"We all are," he says, and smiles one last time.

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"Mom," she calls, brushing aside a cobweb with a grimace. "Where did you say the decorations were?"

"They're underneath the card table!" Her mother's voice is muffled, nearly drowned out by the too-loud television and the metallic clang of pots and pans.

"I already checked under the card table!"

"What?"

"I said, I – oh, never mind." Grumbling, the young woman shoves aside a basket full of old greeting cards and a dusty cardboard box labeled 'Purple Heart'. She scans the attic with a critical eye. "If I were Christmas ornaments, where would I be…?"

There's a box in the corner that catches her eye, shadowed partially by her Grandmother's antique floor-length mirror, and she sidles across the attic to inspect it. 'Bonnie's Stuff' is written on the side in colorful permanent marker, and as she opens the box her dark eyes soften. It's not Christmas ornaments, but it's something so much better.

"Hey there, guys," she says, to no one in particular. Her old toys stare up at her, ragged and grubby but still smiling despite it all, and she picks each of them up with a kind of melancholy reverence. Chuckles and Buttercup and Dolly… Rex and Slink and Hamm… Buzz and Jessie and… and Woody. Her fingers skim lightly across Woody's banged-up old sheriff's badge. She puts his hat back on and gently pulls his string.

"Th-there's a sna – "

The young woman frowns as the disjointed recording is cut short. She tries pulling it again, and again, but the string keeps getting stuck partway.

"There's a snake in my boot," Bonnie whispers, and rubs at her eyes, which are starting to prickle.

Too much dust in this stupid attic.